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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002336

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SUBJECT: AFGHAN HOSTAGE SITUATION: MISSION'S ASSESSMENT

Classified By: CDA Bill Stanton. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Fifteen days after 23 Korean hostages were kidnapped by the Taliban in Afghanistan, emotions are running high in Korea. Especially after two hostages were killed, pressure is mounting on the ROKG to ensure the remaining hostages are saved. Some politicians and leftist groups are seeking to capitalize on the widely-held perception among Koreans that the U.S. holds enormous sway over the Afghan government, leading to demands that Washington should force more "flexibility" on Kabul. Extremist groups are even blaming the U.S. for the situation. Nonetheless, these are not yet the sentiments of the South Korean mainstream. Efforts by Washington, our Missions in Kabul and Seoul, and the ROKG to explain the difficulty of the situation in Afghanistan and the high level of cooperation between our two countries have contributed greatly to keeping the situation from spilling over to our Alliance or bilateral relationship. Most Koreans do not see the tragedy as clearly anyone's fault, beyond that of the Taliban. Beyond that, the hostages themselves are frequently the target, blamed for their missionary zeal and naive assumptions. Our assessment is that negative feelings toward the U.S. can be contained through continued close U.S.-ROK cooperation and timely public outreach. All bets are off, however, if the Taliban kill more hostages. In that case, we will see many more fingers pointing toward the U.S.; our bilateral relations would suffer; and we could even find ourselves becoming an election issue in December.

HANDLING THE SITUATION

¶2. (C) In a luncheon meeting with CDA August 3, Cho Tae-yong, Senior Advisor to the Foreign Minister, said that he and his colleagues had been working night and day on the hostage situation. There was no other agenda for the Ministry for now. The greatest challenge, Cho lamented, was feeding the press. The Blue House was now giving daily press briefings.

¶3. (C) Over the past several days, these ROKG briefings have been helpful in controlling the Korean tendency to blame the United States. MOFAT and Blue House officials have especially emphasized the difficulty of the situation on the ground and the extent of ROK-U.S. cooperation. In one

off-the-record briefing DFM Shim Yoon-joe told reporters on August 2, "It doesn't help anyone to criticize the U.S. From the outset, the USG has consistently said it was looking at this crisis as if an American citizen were taken hostage." A high-level Blue House spokesman said on August 3 in another off-the-record briefing, "The Blue House position is that the key to this issue is in the hands of the Afghan government. The Blue House has not explicitly commented on the controversy surrounding the U.S. responsibility, lest it become an even bigger issue." He added, "The press must point out the problems of making this into an anti-American issue."

¶4. (C) The meeting with the families of the victims in the Embassy on August 1 as well as the USG statements from Washington, Kabul and Seoul seem to be having their desired effect on the ROKG and the Korean people. After their meeting with CDA, the families of the hostages spoke out against any movement to hold the U.S. responsible, saying that they would turn down all requests for rallies and candlelight vigils. A representative of the families also asked that "various groups put their political arguments on hold," pleading that their only interest was the hostages' safe return.

AFGHANISTAN AS POLITICAL FOOTBALL

¶5. (C) The families were, of course, appealing that the hostages not be used as political tools in this election season. So far, only the extreme left has called immediately for withdrawal of all coalition forces from Afghanistan and blamed the U.S. for the situation. Reactions from most presidential contenders have been measured, mostly because the mainstream Korean population is not prepared to put the blame on Washington. Leading presidential hopeful Lee Myung-bak sent letters to several Muslim leaders asking them to use their influence on the Taliban to free the hostages. One of Lee's foreign policy advisors, Dr. Yim, told poloff that, "Lee knows this will not have any effect, but he also knows he must do something." Progressive candidate and former Primer Minister Lee Hae-chan said that, "abductees in Afghanistan have nothing to do with anti-Americanism. To politicize cases like this is inhumane." Two other mainstream progressive candidates, Chung Dong-young and Sohn Hak-kyu, have asked for a larger U.S. role and for the U.S. to be flexible on its policy regarding prisoner exchanges.

POLITICAL REACTIONS

¶6. (C) Facing their own election campaign early next year, legislators in the National Assembly also want to be seen as contributing. Korean legislators are currently visiting Washington, and may also consider visiting Afghanistan, although MOFAT officials -- and the South Korean press -- have questioned the usefulness of such ventures. Still, Korean legislators have also adopted a statement calling for a more active attitude on the part of the Afghan government, USG, and the UN. The National Assembly Foreign Affairs Committee and Defense Committee held a closed, joint meeting August 3 to seek bipartisan measures for the Afghan situation. A total of 16 member lawmakers of the two committees were present, along with ROKG officials. They decided to: 1) call for close cooperation with the Afghan government, the USG, and the international community; 2) invite the Ambassadors of related countries to the Assembly to discuss the matter; 3) call for the cooperation of the International Parliamentary Union (IPU); and 4) in the longer term, launch a National Assembly Study Group for Peace in the Middle East.

¶7. (C) Among the more active politicians are a number of left-leaning legislators. Thirty-six Uri Party defectors recognized the Taliban's request for prisoner exchange but said it was, "beyond the reach of the ROK," and depended on

the will of the U.S. They argued that just as the ROK sent troops to Afghanistan for the Alliance, now the U.S. should show flexibility for the sake of a solid Alliance. One of the leaders of the splinter group, Rep. Woo Sang-ho, told poloff that if more hostages were killed, the situation could go from bad to worse. The conservative GNP has kept relatively quiet on the situation, calling for the ROKG to save the hostages and warning that anti-Americanism should not be tolerated.

CONSEQUENCES: TROOP WITHDRAWAL

¶8. (C) While the theory that the hostage situation should be blamed on the U.S. because the ROK is in Afghanistan on behalf of the U.S. has not gained credence outside the extreme left, the situation has likely diminished the likelihood that the ROK will extend its troop deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq. Leading political scientist Kang Won-taek told poloff that many will call for the withdrawal of ROK troops if the situation were not resolved soon. Rep. Woo echoed this sentiment when he told poloff that before the hostage crisis, many legislators were against any extension past December, 2007 of the Afghanistan and Zaytun deployments and that now there was virtually no chance that the ROK could do this. He added that DefMin Kim Jang-soo's statements that an extension was possible were, "his thoughts only -- Kim does not know the National Assembly."

NOT 2002 ALL OVER AGAIN

¶10. (C) In 2002, there were demonstrations for months against the U.S. stemming from a tragic accident in June, when a USFK military vehicle struck two schoolgirls. Most pundits agree that the current situation is quite different. Prominent political commentator Park Song-min told poloff on August 3 that there was, "zero chance that the Afghanistan situation could spiral into a major anti-U.S. election issue." Independent lawmaker Kim Boo-kyum told poloff on Aug 2 that if more hostages were killed, while it was not likely that anti-American sentiment would come to the forefront, it was possible. Therefore, he cautioned, we all had to work hard to avoid such a situation. He added that most Koreans hoped that the U.S. would intervene and secure the safe release of the hostages. So far, there have only been small and sporadic demonstrations (10-50 people) in front of the Embassy. The larger vigils (with up to 100 people) have been for the victims, and not directed at the U.S.

BACKLASH AGAINST ANTI-U.S. SENTIMENT

¶11. (C) On August 3, the families of the Korean hostages spoke out against any movement to hold the U.S. responsible for the unresolved crisis, saying anti-American demonstrations could put the hostages' lives at greater risk. Cha Sung-min, a representative of the families, said, "All we want is the hostages returned safely. We ask that various groups put their political arguments on hold and plead to the international community for their safe return." Some netizens have criticized Korea's penchant for overseas missionary and church volunteer work and even called the church groups the "Christian Taliban."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) The most common reaction among Koreans is one of frustration, which they are choosing to vent in several different ways. Of course, all of them blame the Taliban, which for most Koreans remain an unknown and incomprehensible group. The second target is the hostages themselves, who are seen as a naive and/or zealous lot, in Afghanistan despite

all the warnings. We have heard scornful remarks about these Christian groups from all segments of Korean society, Christians and non-Christians alike. Particularly bitter are MOFAT officials, who believe that these groups are risking South Korea's reputation and relations with the outside world. The third target is their Government. South Koreans are deeply frustrated by its inability to project power or offer a clear way out. On the other hand, most Koreans are of the view that the USG has the power and tools to bring the hostage crisis to closure. Yet many are aware that there are enormous costs involved in making concessions to terrorists, including encouraging more hostage-taking.

¶13. (C) Overall, we believe that the current situation can be contained. We are not likely to see mass anti-U.S. demonstrations, which could spill over into our Alliance and bilateral relations. Much depends, however, on what happens on the ground in Afghanistan. If there were more killings, the mood would change drastically. There would be recriminations all around, including against the ROKG and USG. Those with a political agenda would exploit such emotions, particularly with the presidential election slated for December this year and National Assembly elections in April next year. To avoid a similar situation as in 2002, when two school girls died in an accident involving a USFK vehicle, we need to consult closely with the ROKG in Seoul, Washington and Kabul and continue our public outreach. Most of all, however, we need a favorable resolution on the ground in Afghanistan.

STANTON